The Story of Lilith

by Rabbi Menachem Levine August 5, 2025 9 min read

Why it's a mistake to make Lilith an icon of Jewish feminism.

> "Tis Lilith.
> Who?
> Adam's first wife is she.
> Beware the lure within her lovely tresses,
> The splendid sole adornment of her hair;
> When she succeeds therewith a youth to snare,
> Not soon again she frees him from her jesses"
>
> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in his 1808 play *Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy*

Goethe was one of the early major writers to popularize Lilith. Since the 19th Century, Lilith has become popular across the Western world. She is portrayed in books, movies, television shows, video games, Japanese animes, comics, and music.

The modern feminist movement found inspiration in the vision of Lilith as a powerful female in Jewish folklore, visualizing her as a woman worthy of emulating. In 1972, Israeli American journalist and writer, Lilly Rivlin published an article on Lilith for the feminist magazine *Ms.*, with the aim of redeeming her for contemporary women. The Jewish feminist magazine *Lilith,* founded in the fall of 1976, took her name as their own, because the editors were galvanized by their interpretation of Lilith's struggle for equality with Adam.

Since then, interest in Lilith has grown among Jewish and non-Jewish feminists, as well as by listeners to contemporary music by women, as highlighted in the Lilith Fair. As Lilly Rivlin writes in her afterword to the book *Whose Lilith?* (1998), "In the late twentieth century, self-sufficient women, inspired by the women's movement, have adopted the Lilith myth as their own. They have transformed her into a female symbol for autonomy, sexual choice, and control of one's own destiny."

If you're looking, Lilith seems to be everywhere in popular culture, and perhaps you would assume she has a leading role in the Bible. Yet Lilith is in fact rarely mentioned in classic

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Who is Lilith?

The most quoted book in contemporary sources about Lilith is also the least reliable.[i] A medieval book called *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* (not to be confused with the 2nd century BCE apocryphal book The Wisdom of Ben Sira) claims that God created Adam and Lilith at the same time from the dust of the earth. According to this book, Lilith refused to subordinate herself to Adam in their intimate relationship, and she ran away from him using the Ineffable Name. Angels tried to force her to return, and she fought back and refused to go to Adam. The story continues that God then made Adam a second wife, Eve, who was content to stay with Adam.

> **Lilith is mentioned at least four times in the Babylonian Talmud. In none of these cases is she referred to as Adam's wife.**

However, the book *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* is in fact not an authoritative source in Jewish literature at all. Perhaps because it bears in its title the familiar name of Ben-Sira some believe it to have authority, but even a cursory reading of the book by one familiar with Jewish texts will demonstrate that this is not a Jewish classic. On the contrary, it is a work filled with demeaning and lewd variations on Biblical accounts and satirical portrayals of Biblical characters. The book is not and never was part of mainstream Jewish literature.[ii]

Is Lilith in The Bible?

The only actual scriptural reference to Lilith is in Isaiah 34:14. It refers to Lilith as being among the beasts of prey and spirits that will lay waste to the land on the day of vengeance. It makes no reference to Adam.

Lilith is mentioned at least four times in the Babylonian Talmud. In none of these cases is she referred to as Adam's wife. The Talmudic passages discuss Lilith in terms of warning that a man should not sleep alone in a house lest Lilith fall upon him in his sleep, that she could influence the outcome of a pregnancy and describing how Lilith can appear.

The text in which there are many references to Lilith is in the Zohar. In examining some of the references, we can gain a further understanding of what and who Lilith is and is not.

The History of Lilith

In *Medrash Haneelam*, a section of Zohar it says:

> Rav Yitzchok said in the name of Rav: Adam was created together with his mate, as it says, "Male and female He created them" (Gen. 5:2), and God separated her from him and brought her to Him, as it says, "And He took one of his sides (ribs)".
> Rav Yehoshua said: There was an Eve before this that was taken away because she was a harmful spirit, and another was given in her place.
> Said Rava: The second one was physical, the first was not, but was rather made from filth and impure sediment.

The Zohar is clear that this being that preceded Eve was not a person but rather a spirit, a harmful spirit that was impure.

Another passage in the Zohar, on Vayikra 19a, is even more explicit on Lilith's creation and her connection to Adam:

> Come and see: There is a female, a spirit of all spirits, and her name is Lilith, and she was at first with Adam. And in the hour when Adam was created and his body became completed, a thousand spirits from the left [evil] side clung to that body until the Holy One, blessed be He, shouted at them and drove them away. And Adam was lying, a body without a spirit, and his appearance was green, and all those spirits surrounded him. In that hour a cloud descended and pushed away all those spirits. And when Adam stood up, his female was attached to his side. And that holy spirit which was in him spread out to this side and that side, and grew here and there, and thus became complete. Thereafter the Holy One, blessed be He, sawed Adam into two, and made the female. And He brought her to Adam in her perfection like a bride to the canopy. When Lilith saw this, she fled.

The Zohar here states, based on the verses in Genesis, that Adam was created as male and female joined at the side/rib, the female side to be known as Eve. Lilith was a spirit that was with Adam before he and Eve were separated. Once the two halves of Adam and Eve were separate and subsequently married, Lilith fled. In this passage as well, it is clear that Lilith is a negative spirit and not an actual physical person.

The great Kabbalist, the Arizal (Rabbi Isaac Luria, 1534-1572) writes that Samael is in charge of all the "male" demons, called *Mazikim*, while his "wife" Lilith is in charge of all the "female" demons, called *Shedim* (*Sha'ar HaPesukim* on Psalms). He further associates Lilith with the sword of the Angel of Death. The Arizal understood Lilith as a spirit of lust, that is still around and dangerous.

> **As the female partner of Satan, the Zohar identifies Lilith as "the ruination of the world," for her role is to bring immorality into the minds and actions of humans.**

Based on the Arizal's understanding, the two above passages in the Zohar can be understood. In the first passage, it describes Adam as having a "harmful spirit" that was removed when Eve was created. The "harmful spirit" of lust was removed when he was married and able to direct his sexuality in a holy and proper manner through connection to his wife. In the latter passage, the understanding is the same. Lilith, representing lust and sexual desire that is directed negatively, "fled" when Adam was joined in marriage to his bride, Eve.

What Happened to Lilith?

The Zohar (ibid) quotes the verse in Isaiah 34:14 that speaks of Lilith. and expounds that when Messiah comes, Lilith will finally be expelled forever:

> When the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring about the destruction of the wicked Rome, and turn it into a ruin for all eternity, He will send Lilith there, and let her dwell in that ruin, for she is the ruination of the world. And to this refers the verse, and there shall lie down Lilith and find her a place of rest (Isaiah 34:14).

Based on the Arizal's explanation of Lilith as the female partner of Satan, we can understand that the Zohar identifies her as "the ruination of the world," for her role is to bring immorality into the minds and actions of humans. For this reason, when the Messiah comes and the world will reach its perfect state, Lilith, as well as Satan, will be completely obliterated.

With an understanding of Lilith based on authentic classic sources, it should be obvious how distasteful it is to make Lilith an icon of Jewish feminism. After all, what would you think of a man who chooses Satan as his role model?

Frequently Asked Questions:

What Does the Name Lilith Mean?

- The name "Lilith" originates from ancient Mesopotamian mythology and is associated with a female demon or spirit. In Jewish tradition, Lilith appears in midrashic and mystical texts, often as a figure representing chaos or rebellion. The name itself is derived from the Hebrew word "lailah," meaning "night," symbolizing darkness or mystery.

What Power Does Lilith Have?

- In Jewish tradition, Lilith is not considered a literal being with actual powers but rather a symbolic figure appearing in midrashic and mystical texts. She is often associated with chaos, temptation, and rebellion, representing forces that challenge spiritual and moral order. Her "power" is metaphorical, symbolizing the human struggle against destructive impulses and the need to align with divine purpose.

i. There are those who assume that the story found in Alphabet of Ben Sira is based on the concept of the “First Eve” found in two places in Genesis Rabbah, a collection of midrashim about the book of Genesis.According to Rabbi Chiya, this First Eve "returned to dust" (Genesis Raba 22:7, Zohar 34b), and God proceeded to create a second Eve for Adam (Genesis Raba 18.4). The Commentators note that these Midrashim (like many other Midrashim) might not be literally true but rather serve to teach Kabbalistic ideas. Either way, nowhere does the Midrash talk about Lililth or anything like the story of the Alphabet of Ben Sira

ii. Some argue that the work was merely as an impious digest of risqué folktales or an anti-rabbinic satire. Other authorities have suggested that it was a polemical broadside aimed at Karaites, or some other dissident movement.

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Rabbi Menachem Levine

Rabbi Menachem Levine is the CEO of JDBY-YTT, the largest Jewish school in the Midwest. He served as Rabbi of Congregation Am Echad in San Jose, CA, from 2007 to 2020. He is a popular speaker and writes for numerous publications on Torah, Jewish History, and Contemporary Jewish Topics. Rabbi Levine’s personal website is **https://thinktorah.org**

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Ra'anan 7 months ago

The more I think of this, Li-li means "for me, for me." As bina, women are builders, while men provide raw materials. If Lilith refused to build, that is ruination. Lilith is also an owl, a night predator seeking to consumer another for herself, not building. Why is NIGHT (layla=me & her) useful for that? Because it's a time of unclarity. Honey is currently forbidden for sacrifices, but one day will be permitted. Honey is from Tamar & both Tamaroth in TaNaKh (Judah's & Amenon's) where involved in lustful acts. One brought ruination (NOT her fault, but Amenon's), the other brought THE SEEDS OF MASHIACH (Yehudha to King David to MASHIACH!!!).We are not yet at the level of sanctifying LUST!

+ 0 — Reply

Toras Emes 7 months ago

Cool article. Debunking fake feminist narratives with real research.Kudos!

+ 6 — Reply

Judy 7 months ago

Was the demon Lilith related to the serpent that tempted Eve with the forbidden tree? The story is not written in the written Torah but the oral torah, there is mentioned about King Solomon and the demons and getting the ring to trap the king of the demons, also it mentions King Solomon had a magic carpet, is there actual demons or is it it a metaphor for germs(according to I think Rambam), Lilith sounds similar to the Hebrew word for night, the story about Lilith is pretty scary, I heard about this entity that endangered people and the way to ward off her bad influence on people

+ 1 — Reply

Sims 8 months ago

Fascinating and a reminder of the sheker of modern-day feminism

+ 12 — Reply

Jose 8 months ago

Very interesting! Muchas gracias!

+ 14 — Reply

RACHEL 8 months ago

Great article and lesson!

+ 16 — Reply

banana 1 year ago

man was given a choice. lilith had none, she is 'evil' because she refused to be anything but equal to adam. it seems to me that adam and god are always the center of this story simply because adam was made first

+ -17 — Reply

Parkwood 1 year ago

Reply to banana

Read the article (and the Torah) Lilith was a female demon...Now ask a different question

+ 18 — Reply

Shoshana 1 year ago

Reply to banana

It's not that she wanted to be Adam's equal but more that she knew his evil spirit and impulsive side; and wanted to see him fall/tested. She debated on it with him that it's not "fair" that they aren't equals since they both know the truth about "Man".
Man was created in the eyes of himself, by means of GD himself. However, Adam was created as a secondary entity to illustrate himself. The first Eve knew this about him and of the state of mankind, his very nature; thus she is his equal but refused to be submissive. In spirit she left and never returned back until Chava was made physically from his own flesh and had by nature the feminine submissive role of "mercy and love" to mankind. In summary, "MEN" think they are GD until they realize that they aren't. Both woman were reminders of it

+ 0 — Reply

Bean 2 years ago

So Isaiah 34:14 is the only place Lilith appears? How do we even know what that is referencing? אַךְ־שָׁם הִרְגִּיעָה לִּילִית וַתַּצְא לָהּ מָנוֹחַ It appears lilith is meant to be something with which we are familiar. And then the rabbis took this random mention of lilith and created an evil backstory to explain the mention? That's what this reads like.

+ -14 — Reply

Ra'anan 7 months ago

Reply to Bean

You need to know about Jewish exegesis to move with this, for example, there's a heqesh w/se'irim (demons) in this verse so there'll be a property/trait transfer. The etymology of Lilith is "li, li," "for me, for me," which suggests extreme selfishness. There's also the "night" etymology, when things aren't clear. The rabbis didn't create an evil backstory, oral fragments called beraithoth ("outsiders") were also given at Sinai by G-d to the Jewish People. They were collected & redacted from 3800 years ago to c. 2000 years ago & were ultimately committed to writing around 1700 years ago due to Roman persecution which was making it different to commit to memory through oral learning.

+ 3 — Reply

ronnie 2 years ago

Why did god so favor Adam, the back story please. Lillith was given no consideration, gods first angel was given no consideration.

+ -12 — Reply